

High Quality Preschools

Overview

Research offers unarguable evidence that a high-quality, research-based preschool program, especially for low-income children, is a gift that keeps on giving. We know that children who attend high quality preschool exhibit stronger language, math, thinking, and social skills. They are better prepared to cooperate in kindergarten and elementary school and their relationships with peers are more positive. Participating children are less likely to need special education services or the service intensity is less. They are also more likely to remain in school. As children continue to develop, they are less likely to be in trouble with the law and, consequently, avoid incarceration¹.

Essential Elements for High Quality Preschool

Standards from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) are pivotal to the creation of high quality early childhood programs and best practice throughout the nation. The following are essential elements that create a high quality preschool program.

Early Childhood Standards –

- O Preschool program standards -- The *Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards (QPPS)*, developed from the NAEYC standards, set the stage for overall quality. Programs grow through self-assessment and improvement plans developed in partnership with a trained facilitator. As programs progress through the stages of the QPPS, the level of quality is raised and, consequently, student achievement increases. One essential component of preschool program standards includes a comprehensive research-based *curriculum* and *systematic student assessment* addressing all areas of child development.
- Student Standards and Benchmarks -- The *Iowa Early Learning Standards*(ELS) guide administrators, teachers, and caregivers in making appropriate decisions on curriculum, programming, and child expectations.
- Teacher Qualifications The most effective preschool teachers are those with at least a four-year college degree and specialized training in early childhood education. Teachers with these qualifications have more responsive interactions with children, provide richer language and cognitive experiences and are less authoritarian. High quality preschool education depends on effective, high-quality teachers. Qualified early childhood teachers with specialized expertise and training are just as essential in preschool as qualified elementary and secondary teachers are in K-12.
- <u>Teacher Compensation</u> Monetary compensation to teachers and paraprofessionals appropriate to the importance of the job and the level of education directly impacts children. High compensation decreases staff turnover and a consistent, skilled staff directly impacts student outcomes. Well-paid teachers feel more respected and are more likely to participate in on-going professional development, thus improving teaching skills and student achievement.

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¹ Committee for Economic Development, 2006. The economic promise of investing in high-quality preschool. Washington: DC.

- Assistant Teacher/Paraprofessional Training The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) benchmark for assistant teacher/paraprofessional training is a minimum of a CDA. The *T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood* ® *IOWA and Apprenticeship Program* in Iowa promotes this quality component through college scholarships for the early care workforce.
- Maximum Class Size The NIEER benchmark for the number of children in a classroom is 20 or fewer with a student teacher ration of 10:1. With a smaller group of children, teachers and paraprofessionals create more opportunities for rich, engaging interaction to promote learning.
- <u>Professional Development</u> Ongoing professional development based on needs determination and research/evidence-based practices is essential to the growth of quality teaching. The NIEER benchmark is a minimum of 15 hours annually. The Department of Education is leading the task to create a statewide professional development system for those in the early care, health, and education field.
- <u>Strong Administrative Support and Leadership</u> Strong administrative support demonstrates not only the importance of early childhood education for long-term student achievement but provides for ongoing monitoring and review to maintain and enhance quality preschool programming practices.
- <u>Family Involvement</u> Compelling research correlates family involvement with student success throughout the educational life span. Through family participation in classroom activities coupled with frequent positive communication between home and school; a constructive, non-threatening relationship is built and nurtured. Parent and family perception and attitude toward school is typically reflected in their children^{1,2}.

Impact of High Quality Preschool

The impact of high quality preschool on the State of Iowa can be evidenced not only in higher test scores, but also in the long-term economic benefits of a more productive and highly skilled workforce. Some of the economic advantages are demonstrated through decreased incarceration, eliminated or reduced special education services, and additional tax dollars from a more employable workforce. The benefits of investing in programs that meet quality standards for children and society are well documented through rigorous research studies. High quality preschools create stronger communities¹.

High quality research-based early learning experiences are essential to building a foundation for achieving positive outcomes for children. In addition, it is the Department of Education's belief that providing a diverse array of environments interwoven with family and community support leads to ultimate learning opportunities for young children of Iowa.

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²Golin, S., Mitchell, A., Gault, B., (2004). The price of school readiness. Institute for Woman's Policy Institute: Washington, D.C.